

April 2021

## Home of the Future

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### Recommended Citation

Clift, G. W. (2021) "Home of the Future," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 1 , Article 15.  
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol1/iss1/15>

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## Home of the Future

There were developments today.

He had worn his blue contacts and he had pocketed the little aerosol breath spray before he left his apartment that morning. As he arrived at the Home, Dutcher had said a shy hello to the milkman, whose name he did not know. When the milkman left, he had secured the door ("Christian? Front door locked.") and had spent most of the morning reviewing company sales literature and, coveralls on, had addressed the problem with the hot water supply to the front walk. He had lunch alone ("Christian? Sitting room t.v. on, channel 26, volume 3.") and then had taken a little nap upstairs. An eighth grade shop class arrived for an "Overview" tour at 2:00. And then, shortly before four, a real estate man had brought in a middle-aged couple and began escorting them around on his own.

Dutcher had sat down on one of the stools at the kitchen deli bar and had gone into reverie when he saw a fairly big fellow in an orange jump suit force the back door of the frame house behind The Home of the Future.

Dutcher was not sure he had ever seen a crime--traffic offenses aside--committed before, and he wondered if what he was seeing was illegal forced entry. It was broad daylight, and the man muscling the door was not dressed like a cat burglar. Dutcher believed, though, that it was an elderly woman who lived in that house, and it seemed to him that she lived alone. Just then the realtor came springing down the stairs.

"Did you see a fellow break into the gray house behind this one?" he asked. "Mrs. Gage says she saw a fellow in bright orange push in the back door, using his shoulder."

His clients were coming along right behind him.

"I saw something like that," Dutcher admitted. And then he said to the computer, "Christian?" and the voice said, "You called?" and he said, "Security function: call the police," and it said, after a little hesitation, "Police called."

"That's the way the computer works," the realtor, a tall man, balding and with a very erect posture, explained to his clients. He looked a little anxious. "It recognizes up to four voices and several dozen commands so that it can adjust the furnace or air conditioner, the lighting, the burglar alarm, or even the window shades."

"That's something," admitted Mr. Gage, the man of the couple, who was a birdy fellow with a little Oklahoma twang in his pronunciation.

"The people across the way need your burglar alarm," Mrs. Gage said. The realtor smiled at this, and the phone began to ring.

"Emergency," said a woman's voice over the phone speaker. "Please push

in the number of the extension you wish to speak to push '4' for Emergency Medical Services, '5' for Fire Department, or '6' for Police Department. Push your number now."

"Christian: push '6.'"

There was a tone, a pause, a click, and then the sound of a phone ringing. "Police," said a different woman's voice.

"Hi," Dutcher said, a little flustered. "I want to report what I believe is a break-in, to the back door of the Runyon house on the west side of the 1600 block of Nuggers."

"When did the break-in occur?" asked the dispatcher.

"Not three minutes ago," answered Mrs. Gage. Then she asked Dutcher: "Maybe that has to go through the computer. Will the computer transmit my voice?"

"What is this," the dispatcher asked, "a party line?"

"A speaker phone," Dutcher answered. "The perpetrator is still inside the house. Can you send a prowler car right away?"

"What's the address of the house?" the dispatcher asked.

"I don't know. I'm in the Foreman Electric Home of the Future at 1616 Foreman Circle, and it's the house right behind the one I'm in."

"Can you describe the house?"

"Allow me," said the real estate agent. "Light gray, frame, two-story, built about 1920, fireplace, black-framed screens, gray asphalt shingles; needs a little work but has definite welcoming potential."

It's the only gray house on that side of that block," Mrs. Gage added.

"Oh," said the realtor.

"Got it," said the dispatcher. "Who's reporting this?"

"My name is Dutcher. I work for Foreman."

"Stay put, Dutcher," she said. "I'll send a patrol car right away."

Just then the guy in the orange jump suit came out of the house carrying a bag of potato chips and a jar of Miracle Whip salad dressing. Dutcher asked Christian to call the police again, but then canceled the call when the burglar disappeared between two houses.

The realtor asked Dutcher to describe for the benefit of his clients some of the new construction techniques Foreman had used in building the Home. Dutcher was distracted, but Mr. Gage prompted him and finally he explained that the company had used plastics instead of stick framing in the non-load-bearing wall between the doors to the dining room and the media room, referring to the cut-out reveal to show how construction workers could thread wires and pipes down inside the accordion pleats behind the plasticized blue board, and he answered a question or two about the in-floor storage and about the wiring racecourse in the baseboards,

but then Mr. Gage began a spiel of his own, and Dutcher stepped out on the deck to look for the suspect.

He was surprised to find it was windy out there, though fairly warm. Dutcher didn't see the burglar, but he did see a bearded cop in a turban come around the far side of the house and begin looking at the back door, holding up his fingers as if he were framing what he saw in a view finder.

"Officer," Dutcher said to him. The policeman didn't turn. "Officer. Officer." Finally he looked at Dutcher, but his expression suggested he was surprised anything existed besides that door frame. "I'm Dutcher, the guy who reported the break-in."

Singh--that's what was on the policeman's name tag--looked at the civilian for about ten seconds and then said. "I need my fingerprint kit." Then he thought for a second. Then he said, "I am with the Police Scientific Investigations Unit," as if that should explain everything to Dutcher and, when he didn't go away, Singh said, "Please speak with the policeman who is interviewing the resident." And he turned and walked back the way he'd come.

Dutcher did not feel comfortable going into Mrs. Runyon's house, and he didn't want to go around to the front door, because Singh might think he was following him. And so he started back to the Home. But just as he was crossing onto Foreman's lot, there was the fellow in the orange jump suit, just a couple of houses down the way, walking along, tight roping the property line without any apparent concern and eating chips from the now open bag. Dutcher also saw Singh returning to Mrs. Runyon's backyard.

"Officer Singh!" he said, directing his whisper. "Officer Singh!"

Singh had reached the back door and was studying the contents of what looked like a plastic tool box he had set down on the back step and had opened. Dutcher went to him and tapped him on the shoulder. Singh jumped. When he turned, Dutcher put a finger to his lips and then pointed to the burglar. Singh looked in the indicated direction and narrowed his eyes.

Leaving Dutcher behind, the policeman walked over to intercept the fellow in the orange jump suit as he came unconcernedly hopscotching along the lot boundary. Singh began to ask the standard questions of the man, who made no attempt to escape. And then the policeman took his subject by his orange upper arm and escorted him around to the front of the crime scene house. Both of them were absolutely expressionless when they walked by Dutcher. The civilian recognized the man in the jump suit as the next door neighbor to the house he had broken in to, though Dutcher and he had never actually met because the man was rarely home during the day, and Dutcher was almost never at the Home in the evening. The suspect still had the bag of chips in his hand as Singh led him off.

A policewoman who had been inside all this time interviewing the homeowner eventually came over to the Home and asked the four people there a few apparently routine questions. Once she had gone, Mr. Gage's party was soon on its way. The bald realtor gave Dutcher a wink on his way out—the unsettling experience they had shared somehow requiring more than cursory business formality. “Thanks for showing them around,” he said. “Now that they’ve seen the advantages of the new methods and features, they’re ready to see houses out in the Crocker development. Preparation’s everything in this business.” The realtor held out his hand to be shaken. As Gage trundled down the walk to his car, Dutcher thought to himself that he had never really considered the motivations of people who visited the Home before, that though he was interested in the new uses of plastics and electronics that the house demonstrated, and though he did not mind showing visitors what was new about the house, he did not care if they themselves bought houses with similar features or incorporated the features into their houses or bought Foreman stock.

He was in the kitchen, gazing out at the crime scene in general but at nothing in particular when the sensors told him someone was approaching the front door (actually this was the second such signal in the last few minutes, but he knew from experience that the first was caused when the evening newspaper bounced up to land at the foot of the front steps). “Christian,” Dutcher said. “Security: front door camera.” He looked at the monitor in the wall, next to the pantry door, and saw Julia about to ring the door bell. Dutcher said, “Christian: camera off.” He took the breath spray out of his pocket and used it. Then he went to let her in.

Acting tired, she gave him a little kiss and tossed her jacket onto the designer sofa in the formal sitting room.

“Tough day?” he asked, using the touch sensitive potentiometer to bring low, slightly peach-colored light into the room indirectly.

“Christian,” Julia said. “Privacy: close the parlor blinds.” She looked up at Dutcher, patting the cushion beside her. “I took a couple of early emergencies. A guy had got a splinter of galvanized tin in his eye scraping his gutters before he painted them, and I had to get that out. Then a high school girl had gotten two contacts in. And the calendar was full.”

“Ideas about Mr. Wright?” Conscious of wanting to be closer to her, he put his arm around her shoulders.

She sighed. “I haven’t really had time to think about it. His eye is so flat, Ray! It’s almost unbelievable.” She thought for a second. “A drill sergeant could bounce a quarter on his damn eye.”

Dutcher giggled and slipped his hand under the collar of her shirt. “His cornea wouldn’t even make a rumple under a blanket, huh? Or, I guess the cornea

would be the blanket.”

She gave him a harder kiss. “We still going out to eat?” she asked.

“We could stick around here for a little while.”

She smiled and stood. “I think I need nourishment; I need to be revived.”

He shrugged. “Christian: security.”

“You called?”

“Night status.” Dutcher said to Julia, “I want to check the back second floor bedroom before we go. The heat’s been wrong up there all day.” She went into the downstairs powder room while he replaced a component in the guest room thermostat.

They saw several of her friends at McDermott’s that evening. Gina McAfferty was eating with Sally and Dave. Julia’s partner, Eddie Defore, and his wife Alice came in a little while later, and Dutcher automatically stood when they stopped by the table. But he didn’t actually have anything to say to them.

After their meal was served, Julia was a little distracted.

“Have you ever thought of a window blind,” Dutcher asked as he rolled the control stick on the blinds which hung in the window next to their table, “as a model of pupil dilation?”

She looked up at him and flicked her eyebrows. “The Wright business is bothering me. You’ll think I’m exaggerating, but his eye is about the shape of this twice baked.”

“No, I believe you. He’s over ninety, after all. His eyes were new in the last century.”

She nodded and smiled, and ate a little.

After five minutes of silence, he asked her. “I’d like to marry you. Could we get married? Would you be willing?”

She looked up, smiling quietly. Her gaze continued, to the point that it embarrassed him, and he looked away. She patted his hand. Then they ate in silence again for a little while.

“You know my father wanted me to be an architect, too, although he got used to the idea I wasn’t going to be one a long time ago.”

Dutcher asked, “What were you, the rebellious kid type, and your father wanted you to follow in his footsteps, professionally, and maybe come home to Nebraska and join the firm, Newton and Newton, or maybe Newton and Daughter?”

She smiled. “That’s about it. Years ago now.”

“I didn’t know,” Dutcher said.

There was another brief pause. “He called today,” Julia added. “I’ve been trying to get him to drive down for a visit. I told him I could get him a play ticket for

Friday. Hope you don't mind." She put down her fork and looked at Dutcher. "I want to sucker him down here, get a good dinner into him, and then show him my house, and you hadn't shown a lot of enthusiasm for going to the theater."

"What house?"

She patted his hand again and smiled. "Finished with your chicken? Let's pay up and I'll give you a tour."

For half an hour they drove across town and out into a housing development that looked as if it had been stalled years before. The last houses, separated by wooded lots and by rock knolls the pavement swept around, looked twenty-years-old, and the curbs, as far as they went, were filled with silt present long enough to have grass and weeds topping it. Julia's site was down in a hollow surrounded by trees and it had a prospect on a stream. They parked the Pontiac, leaving the headlights on and pointed at the frame, and walked up the sandy driveway bed.

"Here's the front door," she told him, as they walked around a load of shingles and a stack of three-quarter inch oriented strandboard. "The garage is over there, and then here's the entrance." They stepped up onto the foundation. "Music room over here. I swiped a couple of ideas from the Home for that, I must admit: the speaker cabinets are all installation jobs."

The flooring was in, as was much of the wall sheathing. But the rafters hung empty, and standing on the stairs Julia and Dutcher could look up to the stars, which looked very close all of a sudden. The light from the sky and the car and from nearby street lamps showed the house to be three stories above ground and generously proportioned.

"You designed this yourself?"

She walked up the stairs to the second floor. He followed. "Watch out for the pail here," she said at the landing. She led him around the second floor and started up the ladder to the third. "I'd been working on the drawings since my last year in school. I started as a diversion from my studies. But then I began to believe I could build the house. And now that I can afford it, or can nearly afford it, I found a lot I liked and called a contractor. I had to change some things for code, of course."

They walked carefully around the third floor. He asked her, "Your father doesn't know about the house?"

"I want to tell him and show him at the same time."

Dutcher wondered if she was committed to building the house when the two of them first met. He tried to remember when she had learned about his profession and how he had come to tell her about the design of the Home. How well had they known each other?

She kissed him, hard at first and then a little playful. He decided to think

later and pulled her to him. They stood hugging silently for a few minutes.

“You going to put in a baseboard racetrack like at the Home?” Dutcher finally asked, imagining things.

“I think that’s the easiest way,” she said. “You know, one of the reasons I oriented the house this way is that that’s north northeast, and so I can put in half a roof load of solar panels for water heating and so on.”

“Clad siding?”

“Stain, I think,” she said.

He continued to be a little uneasy about everything, but he found he needed to talk to someone. He told her about the breaking and entering as they drove back across town. There was a little information about it on the news: the police booked the neighbor in the orange jumpsuit for burglary and asked for a \$1000 bond. The Miracle Whip had not been recovered.